

ADVANCING PRINCIPALS' HUMAN RIGHTS LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN AN ERA OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

The rapid pace of digital revolution in education requires school principals to reconsider and adjust their methods of leadership. To handle the opportunities and difficulties presented by digital transformation, this study suggests a Human Rights Leadership (HRL) action toolkit for school principals. Digital technologies not only change the way education is managed and led, but it redefines the concepts of social justice, equality, and inclusion in educational settings. It is increasingly expected of principals to combine digital literacy with human rights competencies to establish learning environments that respect the rights of all learners and educators. The study emphasized human rights leadership practices necessary for promoting an inclusive learning, reducing digital divides, and guaranteeing that technological improvements benefit all learners. The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) was used as the theoretical framework for this paper. We qualitatively analysed stipulations from *UNICEF's policy guide on children and digital connectivity* to show the nature and importance of human rights leadership practices in an era of digital transformation. The results demonstrated that in an era of digital change, *affordable access, protection from harm and privacy and identity* can be useful tools for advancing principals' human rights leadership practices which we propose in a human rights leadership action toolkit. By integrating digital innovation with human rights imperatives, the findings advance school principals' responsibilities as agents of educational and societal transformation and digital leadership. To promote human rights leadership in the digital age, this paper recommends that principals strive to be an agent of transformation to advance HRL in an era of digital transformation.

Keywords: *Digital transformation, human rights leadership, principals, toolkit, UNICEF.*

1. Introduction

Digital transformation is changing the educational landscape by integrating technologies such as cloud-based platforms, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things (IoTs). These technologies improve individualised learning and promote global connectedness (UNESCO, 2021). However, the current issues with equity and inclusion are exacerbated by these technological changes. While schools with more resources are quick to adopt these advanced tools, a staggering 1.3 billion children aged 3-17 are without internet access in underprivileged areas, thereby threatening the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) for inclusive education (United Nations, 2015). Given the foregoing, school principals face challenges in navigating a complex environment where the digital divide is worsened by socio-economic, geographic and gender disparities (Van Dijk, 2020). In addition, ethical issues such as data privacy breaches and biased AI systems pose a threat to learners' rights (Regan & Jesse, 2019; Williamson, 2017). Notably, the predominant school leadership practices are devoid of addressing human rights practices necessary for fostering digital transformation in schools. The lack of requisite human rights leadership skills could be associated with a disconnect between technological adoption and adherence to the principles that guides its ethical use (Ross, 2022). To bridge the identified gap, this paper drew on the *UNICEF's policy guide on children and digital connectivity* (2018) to propose a digital transformation toolkit for school principal in the era of digital transformation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Human Rights Leadership (HRL)

Human Rights Leadership (HRL) in education is a transformative approach rooted in social justice principles that empower school principals to advocate for learners' rights and ensure equitable access to

education (Robinson, 2023). It enables school principals to address systemic disparities and align school policies with the broader goals of educational equity (Dladla, 2020). HRL encompasses establishing a clear vision that prioritizes learners' rights and welfare thereby creating an environment where they feel heard and respected (National Council for Social Studies, 2021). This leadership model transcends the traditional educational management approach by emphasizing smooth interpersonal relationships practices (Smylie et al., 2016) promoting diversity and countering injustice (Stamaria & Stamaria, 2015). Additionally, it encompasses the development of responsive leadership practices (Naido, 2019) that equip school leaders to create a human right-informed atmosphere thereby contributing to a more equitable and socially just society.

2.2. Human rights leadership in an era of digital transformation

Given the cascading effects of school leadership on learning outcomes, the role of school leaders in the implementation of digital transformation is paramount as it entails the infusion of a computer-oriented approaches to learning into traditional teaching and learning processes (Karakose, et al., 2023; Maisyaroh, et. al., 2024). Scholarly evidence suggests that digital transformation may be associated with improved instructional delivery and increased learner digital nativity (Flores & Mean, 2025; Garcia-Penalvo, 2021). However, the rate of digital assimilation in the education sector varies across developing economies due to infrastructural deficits, government priorities and socio-economic disparities. Despite the associated benefits, adherence to human rights policy guidelines such as data privacy, equitable access and online safety remain a concern in these economies (Jogezai et al., 2023; Karakose et al., 2023). To mitigate these challenges, the adoption of a human rights-based approach to digital transformation could promote an agenda of inclusion, privacy protection and ethical data usage as well as the safeguard learners' rights (Flore & Mean, 2025; Maisyaroh, 2024).

2.3. UNICEF's policy guide on children and digital connectivity (2018)

To ensure equitable access and offer guidelines for adoption of digital technologies, *UNICEF's Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* (2018) serves as a blueprint for the adaptable deployment of digital connectivity in schools. The guideline provides for safe, inclusive and equitable access to digital technology for learners. Specifically, the policy document addresses the potential risks and challenges associated with digital transformation in schools via its provision for protection against harmful content, violation of data privacy and disparities in access to digital resources (UNICEF, 2018). The policy document outlines six thematic areas that serve as blueprints for the deployment of digital literacy in schools. These areas include affordable access to digital skills, protection from harm, privacy and identity, business standards and government policy. Consistent with tenets of human right leadership, the *UNICEF policy guidelines on children and digital connectivity* (2018) serve as a framework for the deployment of digital literacy in schools. The provision of the guidelines suggests that its adoption would reduce digital divides among marginalized groups including female learners, learners with disabilities and those in rural schools. It would also enable school leaders to integrate digital literacy into the curriculum as well as develop robust data protection practices (UNICEF, 2018: 12-15). Ultimately, the adoption of these policy guidelines could serve as the basis for developing human rights leadership skills among school principals.

3. Theoretical framework

This study employs the human rights-based approach (HRBA). The goal of a HRBA is to make sure that human rights are actively incorporated into daily activities and decision-making, not only recognized in policies (Fitzgerald et al., 2020). In the era of digital transformation, school principals are advised to imbibe a HRBA to protect and defend the rights of learners for inclusivity, access and privacy in their daily involvement with digital devices. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024) posit that policies should be used to ensure that digital transformation remains human-centric and rights-oriented. A rights-based approached in a digital era is further emphasized by UNICEF (2018) which maintained that international standards and best practices must serve as the foundation for protective measures and safeguards, which must maintain a balance between protecting children's privacy and data and other rights. An application of the HRBA was thus relevant because policy requires school principals to consider how they can enact human rights leadership in the age of digital transformation.

4. Methodology

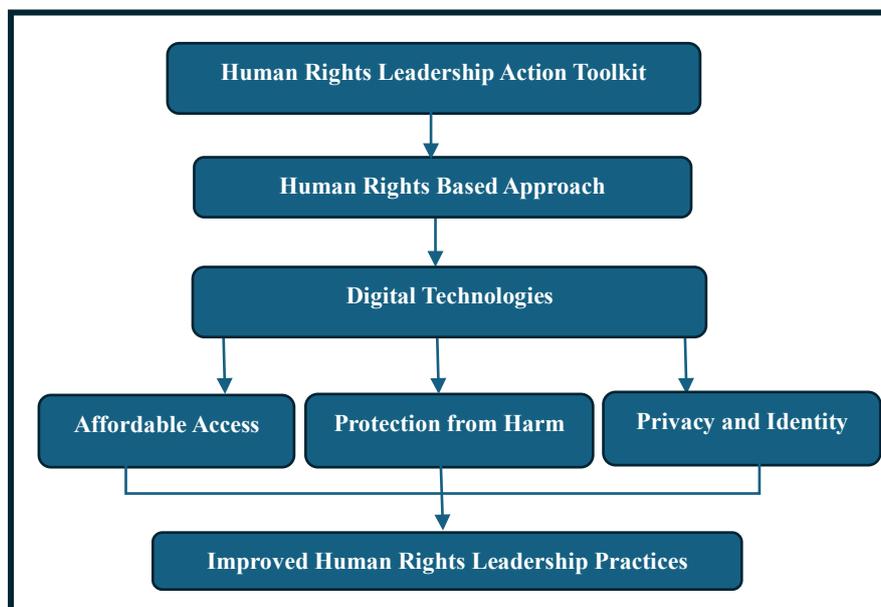
We adopted a qualitative approach in our study to explore the meaning of texts in the UNICEF (2018) *Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity* to advance principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation. A document analysis was conducted of selected texts within the Guide to interpret meanings

within to obtain a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon or problem. Due to the consistency of the data, it is advantageous to analyse pre-existing texts as the data remains unchanged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In using this method, pre-existing texts are critically examined to identify meaningful trends and insights (Morgan, 2022). Complementary to a qualitative approach, we applied a conceptual research design (CRD) which focuses on scrutinizing existing concepts from texts in policies and information already in the public domain (Heinonen & Gruen, 2024). We analysed texts in UNICEF's Policy Guide on Children and Digital Connectivity (2018) to understand new ways to advance principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation. First, we read the document to acquaint ourselves with relevant texts that have possible significance with principals' HRL in the era of digital transformation. Second, we reread and selected texts with the closest relationship and patterns with the phenomenon being studied. Third, the selected texts were coded to check their coherence and labelled with phrases that represent their content (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Afterwards, we identified three themes that strongly aligned with principals' HRL in the era of digital transformation, namely, affordable access, protection from harm and privacy and identity. We then employed thematic analysis to understand how the three selected texts communicate information of principals' human right leadership in a digital era.

5. Discussion

We propose a Human Rights Leadership Action toolkit (HRLAT) that can contribute to advancing principals' HRL in an era of digital transformation (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Human rights leadership action toolkit (HRLAT).



5.1. Affordable access

According to UNICEF (2018) “affordable access is defined as the availability of digital devices and internet connectivity at a rate that enables all children irrespective of their socioeconomic background, to use them effectively for communication, learning and engagement in the digital world” (p. 9). Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not specifically list internet and digital access as a human right, it is acknowledged that these resources are necessary for the exercise of other fundamental rights, including freedom of speech and right to information (Malatsi, 2025). In South Africa, the constitution emphasizes the importance of access to information and freedom of expression (RSA, 1996). As a result, principals can further their HRL by fostering digital literacy and guaranteeing all learners and teachers have fair access to digital resources. Hamzah et al., (2021) contends that this entails offering professional development, encouraging an innovative culture and using data to guide decisions on digital integration. More so, principals promote HRL by advocating for policies that make digital devices and internet accessible, prioritizing digital training and fostering partnership to mitigate digital divide (OECD, 2022). In sum, affordable access to internet and digital devices are thus relevant for advancing principals' HRL as it would foster freedom of speech and right to information. These are fundamental human rights critical to address digital divides and guarantee fair access to technology.

5.2. Protection from Harm

UNICEF (2018) advised that principals should use their leadership “to address online risks, vulnerability and harm” (p. 17). Protecting learners from harm in the era of digital transformation necessitates a multifaceted strategy that emphasizes digital literacy, appropriate online conduct, and strong reporting and support mechanisms. Teaching children about online safety, privacy, and moral behaviour should be a top priority for school principals who should also set up explicit procedures for reporting instances of abuse (UNICEF, 2023). Protecting learners in school is an act of defending their human rights. This could be championed by guaranteeing a secure and welcoming learning environment free from abuse and discrimination, premised on equality and inclusion. The South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], (2012) discloses that protecting learners from online abuse and discrimination entails safeguarding their rights to equality, safety and non-discrimination which culminates as educational rights of learners. Further, the South African Constitution and SAHRC placed a significant interest in protecting learners from every form of harm (including in the use of digital devices) and always emphasized learners’ interest. This involves defending learners’ access, privacy and ensuring that abusive contents were properly reported (RSA, 1996; SAHRC, 2012). In this regard, principals’ HRL can be advanced when they protect learners and educators from online abuse, discrimination and harm, while ensuring digital literacy and ethical online conduct.

5.3. Privacy and identity

The constant changes in the age of digital transformation requires school principals to search for “appropriate strategies to avoid risks and seek support when needed” (UNICEF, 2018, p. 13) so that individuals’ privacy can be protected. Privacy and identity are pertinent safety measures to be considered when making use of digital devices as they could have a direct impact on users’ safety, autonomy, and human dignity particularly for younger learners and other vulnerable populations (UNICEF, 2018). Notably, privacy and identity are fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Right (United Nation, 1948) as freedom of expression and thinking depends on people being able to manage their personal information and choose how it is shared. Moreover, accessing services, exercising rights, and guaranteeing legal protection all depend on having a distinct and identifiable identity. In the South African context, the enactment of the constitutional rights to privacy and identity in the digital age are seen in the “Protection of Personal Information Act [POPIA]” and “Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act [RICA]” (RSA, 1996; Staunton, 2020) which points to the profound attention given to the exercise of human rights. Therefore, to advance school principals’ HRL in the fast-growing digital world, a grasp of privacy and identity as fundamental human rights should be upheld to ensure dignity, safety and autonomy of learners.

6. Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of human rights leadership in the context of digital transformation in education. This study highlights the challenging role of school principals in navigating digital transformation in schools while upholding human rights principles. To overcome these hurdles the study proposes a human rights leadership action toolkit (HRLAT) as a framework for principals to advance human rights leadership practices during digital integration. Underpinned by the provisions of UNICEF’s policy guideline on children and digital connectivity 2018, the toolkit also addresses some of the challenges associated with the implementation of digital transformation in schools. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on best practices regarding human rights leadership in schools. Given the conceptual nature of the study, future research could focus on conducting empirical and longitudinal studies to assess its practicality and the long-term efficacy of the proposed toolkit.

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